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TRANSFER OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES IN AFRICA

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These days everything has some technology, logical structure, rational methodology or systematic approach. Development information and documentation also have some technology that has been produced by the research efforts of private and public agencies, countries and organizations.

For several years, Member States of the United Nations have felt the need to define norms that could be used by various research groups to work in a standardized manner that would enable them to be compatible with each other while retaining their distinctive personalities. UNESCO was given the mandate to define such international standards formulated in the course of various UNISIST meetings. The standards are general guidelines that most countries and organizations have adopted to their specific needs. Using UNISIST principles, FAO has created the documentation system called AGRIS for agricultural documentation needs. The Dag Hammarksjold Library in New York, on its part, has developed the UNBIS system which for lack of effective support in the field the otherwise numerous United Nations Offices and Information Centres have yet to succeed in getting other bodies to accept or adopt.

The Canadian International Research and Development Centre (IDRC) has developed its own documentation system which mainly uses documents produced by the United Nations family. The system, DEVSIS, has also encountered enormous difficulties getting accepted not for lack of quality but for a lack of enthusiasm on the part of users and of support in the field.

The problem of Africa has been the impossible choice it has to make. More than three-quarters of the African people live in rural areas. FAO has been very ingenious in using national, individual correspondents to succeed in effectively establishing the AGRIS system. The UNBIS system has been a total failure in Africa and on other continents. After several years, the DEVSIS system has found its feet and gained a following in Latin America, Europe, Asia and Africa.

The tragedy is that in terms of documentation technology, Africa is somewhat been blackmailed into adopting one of the technologies before it will be given money.

By creating the Pan-African Documentation and Information System (PADIS), Africa is building up a synthesis. Indeed, a detailed study of the three systems provided two things:

(a) The UNBIS System does not follow the UNISIST recommendations as proposed by UNESCO. Adopting it would throw Africa into complete isolation. For that matter, no African countries or organizations use it.

(b) The well-established AGRIS System and the up-and-coming DEVSIS system are based on two different kinds of documents (agricultural documents and official reports of international organizations). They both follow UNISIST principles while retaining their respective features.

The work of PADIS has been to make things easy for African documentalists by bringing the AGRIS and DEVSIS Systems into a compatible relationship with each other.

Africa's documentation technology as developed by PADIS enables any documentalists to use a single indexation manual and a single entry slip for any type of documents for no matter what organization the final product is intended. The PADIS manual and entry slip enable AGRIS and DEVSIS to be integrated and keep Africa above the fray of the various schools of thought which would only make Africa stagnate. While documentation technology has been developed for conventional and non-conventional documents, it might be asked what has been done for statistical series and numerical, technological, mineral, cartographic and other data. The answer is nothing, or more precisely, a surfeit of poor quality information. Involved in the rat race are numerous schools, innumerable data bases, and myriad technologies. For statistical series, PADIS has with the assistance of the French Government and under the aegis of the Statistics Division's PADIS-STAT Project, developed a technology which will begin to be tested in the very near future. We are still groping our way with regard to other non-documentary data.

Within the next five years, we expect to initiate various technologies that would bring about the pooling of all this information for use by all parties concerned with the development of Africa.

While some trials are being conducted, they are still too insignificant and have yielded no results worth mentioning.